

TEN YEARS AGO...

A cruel tragedy occurred in our state's history ten years ago, when, not one, but two catastrophic hurricanes struck within a few weeks of each other. The storms stunned unprepared residents, paralyzed whole parishes and uprooted more than a million of the state's [population](#). The sad and desperate search for loved ones and the shocking events inside and out of the Superdome are branded in our memories.

Soon after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, nearly all forms of telecommunication ceased to exist in most of Louisiana and Mississippi, an area roughly equal to 95,000 square miles. Major highways were impassable, most airports were closed. Katrina caused flooding and great wind damage to the New Orleans area and to large portions of the central and eastern parishes of the state.

Category 5 Hurricane Rita caused extreme damage to homes, schools and businesses in Cameron, Vermilion and the other southwestern coastal parishes. Hundreds of thousands of people attempting to evacuate produced highway gridlock in every direction.

Nearly a third of the Legislature's members lost their homes and their district offices in hurricane-stricken areas. The Senate President and Speaker quickly established a legislative resource center manned by House and Senate staffers as an emergency response center to assist members with their constituents' problems. The **Legislative Resource Center** worked with the Office of Emergency Preparedness and countless other entities to respond to more than 700 requests for assistance.

As Clerk of the House Butch Speer said, "The memories and experiences of hurricanes Katrina and Rita will live with us forever, becoming another marker in our lives. The charge to create the Legislative Resource Center to assist the members in dealing with the two storms also created such a marker-event – the conjoining of the House and Senate staffs, cooperative and supportive working groups, shared responsibilities and authorities. We learned we aren't actually separate, merely separated staffs."

"What about the next time?" Speer asked. The Office of Homeland Security (I'm digesting their long name) has recreated the Emergency Operations Center to match the blueprint from the federal office, the National Incident Management System [NIMS](everything has an acronym!). In 2005, all functions, logistics, assets, resources, and most decisions were made on a "trading floor." In 2006, and forward, these areas of responsibility are divided and spread through out the Emergency Preparedness building and even beyond. The legislature and Legislators will not interact with the EOC as we did in 2005," Speer said.

"First, the legislature will have a staff presence within the EOC, as we eventually did in 2005. Additionally, there will be a resource room [VIP room] at the Emergency Preparedness building, but separate from the EOC. This room will be staffed by the legislature and the Governor's office and is designed as an information outlet for legislators and other elected officials. Further, the two presiding officers, or their designees, will have a seat at the Joint Command Center, the situation room

for emergency operations," Speer said.

"The pregnant question is: will we need a Legislative Resource Center for future mega-emergencies? To which I must answer (of course): I don't know. The Senate President and the Speaker strongly support the resource center concept, however, the resource room at OEP may replace our Capitol resource center. There is always a caveat: if the communication assets at the resource room will not support us handling the volume of contacts we experienced during Kat-Rita, you may rest assured the LRC will rise, phoenix like, from its deep repose," Speer said.

Governor Blanco called a special legislative session, the 2005 1st Extraordinary Legislative Session on Nov. 6, to address storm-related needs. The state budget was cut by more than \$600 million to offset the decline in state revenue and fees brought about by the hurricanes. Among the programs cut were the Rural and Urban Development funds, healthcare and education. The House of Representatives voluntarily cut its budget by \$1 million. The special session produced an assortment of hurricane-related legislation.

In February 2006, Gov. Blanco called a second special 12-day legislative session to outline her plans for spending federal hurricane recovery money. The 2006 First Extraordinary Session was held at the New Orleans convention center following a **legislative bus tour** earlier in the day of the devastated Ninth Ward.

The session continued hurricane relief efforts that were begun in the November special session. Legislation was passed (ACT 5) that created the Louisiana Recovery Authority as a state agency to coordinate programs and funding for hurricane recovery.

Also passed in the special session was legislation to move the authority of the Military Department to carry out the state's homeland security and emergency preparedness functions and transfer that authority to a new office, the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness in the Office of the Governor.

The Road Home Program (<https://www.road2la.org/>), which was developed as the state's housing recovery program, provided homeowners affected by Hurricanes Rita or Katrina to receive up to \$150,000 in compensation for losses to stay, buy out and relocate in Louisiana or sell their home. In addition, the Road Home Program loaned money to restore and construct thousands of rental properties. But the Road Home Program was slow to help. One year after the storms, only 675 homeowners had been awarded assistance.

Eventually, however, eligible residents across the Louisiana coastal region received \$8.9 billion to rebuild and protect their homes and rental properties, according to numbers provided by the Road Home Program website.

The nation and the world reached out to Louisiana with boundless generosity as countless churches, corporations, relief organizations and many, many others sent volunteers, water, food, clothing and supplies.

A year later, New Orleans saw the return of the Saints, as well as the reopening of some of its celebrated restaurants. Now, ten years later, a new future

has taken root. Many former residents moved back and metro New Orleans has become one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S.

The stricken communities of southwest Louisiana overcame amazing odds to rebuild their towns and schools. FEMA provided public assistance grants for debris removal and emergency protective measures and later, grants to repair or rebuild damaged public facilities.

We've heard survivors of Katrina describe their experiences: people who swam from their homes, who remember the sound of gunshots in the darkness and watched from their rooftops with indescribable fear as waters poured out of the pumping station and engulfed homes, cars and escape routes.

It is ten years later, and the streetcars are rolling once again. Memories have softened, and the people of Louisiana have moved forward, their spirit intact.